

# Oral literary traditions in North Sumatra

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## ABSTRACT

This article deals with traditional literature of the Pakpak-Dairi and Karo peoples in North Sumatra, who are speakers of closely related Batak languages and have many common features in their language and culture. Their traditional lifestyle, based on agriculture and the use of forest products, requires the regular performance of community rituals featuring songs, dance, music and other oral traditions including storytelling. The songs, prayers, and stories belonging to their literary tradition have characteristic features that are intimately connected with the social context in which they are created and performed. Karo and Pakpak-Dairi oral genres often contain information about the natural environment, local customs and religious concepts. They may also reflect perceptions of relationships with neighbouring groups, such as the Minangkabau and the Malays who live in the coastal areas.

## KEYWORDS

Oral traditions, Batak literature, Karo prayer, Dairi storytelling.

## INTRODUCTION

This article discusses oral literary traditions of the Pakpak-Dairi and Karo populations in North Sumatra.<sup>1</sup> Both are speakers of Batak languages, along with the Simalungun, Toba, Angkola and Mandailing peoples. For many centuries the various peoples in this area have been in contact and there are

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many common features in their language and culture. This holds especially true for the neighbouring Pakpak-Dairi and Karo peoples. Their life-style, based on agriculture and the use of forest products, requires the regular performance of community rituals that help to maintain mutual cooperation.

Both Pakpak-Dairi and Karo peoples have long been in contact with Minangkabau, Acehnese, and Malay languages and cultures. In fact, the North Sumatran storytelling traditions are rooted in a common Indonesian pattern of oral transmission taking place primarily in the context of life cycle and agricultural rituals, and often in relation to origin stories.

The songs, prayers, and stories belonging to this oral tradition are intimately connected with the social context in which they are created and transmitted. Karo and Pakpak-Dairi oral genres are often part of a ritual and contain important information about local customs and religious concepts. They may also reflect local perceptions of cultural relationships between neighbouring groups, such as the connections of Karo and Dairi peoples with other Batak groups or with the Malays in the coastal areas.

#### CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF BATAK LITERATURE

The indigenous peoples of North Sumatra are collectively known in Indonesia today as “Batak”, yet they do not have one common Batak language, but speak about six different dialects, some of which are not mutually intelligible.

According to scholars of Sumatran languages the differences between the various Batak dialects are so great that some of them must be considered as separate languages. Yet the Karo and Pakpak-Dairi dialects are closely related, forming the Northern group of Batak languages that also includes the Alas dialect (Voorhoeve 1955: 9; Kozok 1999: 14). Being the first to make a scholarly study of the languages of North Sumatra, the nineteenth-century linguist Herman Neubronner van der Tuuk classified Dairi as one of the three main Batak dialects (Van der Tuuk 1971: XLVII). He did not make a distinction between Karo and Dairi, possibly because he did not have much direct contact with its speakers.

More recent research reveals that there is important cultural and linguistic variability in the whole area. With regard to the Pakpak, the anthropologist Coleman wrote that they divide themselves into five separate cultural areas: Boang, Kelasén, Kapas, Pegagan and Simsim. He adds that “for locals they represent areas with slight but significant differences in language and custom: Kelasén locals say the language they speak is called ‘Dairi’, and that the whole dialect sub-group should be known by the name ‘Dairi’ or at least by a combination label like Pakpak-Dairi” (Coleman 1983: 56-57).

Scholars usually characterize Batak literature as an oral tradition, in spite of the fact that the various Batak groups have known to read and write for centuries, witness the presence of a large number of Batak manuscripts in libraries, museums, and private collections in Indonesia and abroad. The majority of these manuscripts are *pustaka*, books written on tree-bark, containing information on magic and ritual, prayers, and divination; some

are letters or laments mostly written on bamboo.

The various scripts, related but somewhat different for each dialect, derive from an ancient Indian Pallava script (Kozok 1999: 62, 65, 2009: 67, 69, 70) and are considered to have magical qualities. Originally, the bark-books were written and used by shamans and their students in order to help preserve their knowledge of ritual, magic, and healing practices. Stories are rarely found in these *pustaka*, and if so, they are in connection with a particular ritual. Some examples mentioned by the well-known Dutch scholar Petrus Voorhoeve are the story of the origin of the cock-augury in a *pustaka* dealing with the *pormanuhon* ritual, and the creation-myth in connection with a description of offering rice (Voorhoeve 1927: 14). Apparently among the Batak peoples of North Sumatra the knowledge of a script did not induce a written literature, as it did in other regions of Indonesia (Brakel 1976: 25).

Most writings on Batak literature tend to generalize the situation in Toba. In his Toba Grammar Van der Tuuk characterized Batak literature as follows: "The literature consists of prescriptions (*poda*) dealing with divination, stories, invocations to spirits, laments (*andung*), ditties (*ende*), long-winded poems, such as, for example, the *si-marganggang gaol*, and narrative riddles (*torhan-torhanan*)" (Van der Tuuk 1971: L). Similarly, Siahaan's "History of Batak Culture", *Sedjarah Kebudajaan Batak*, that describes five main literary genres in its chapter on Art and Literature, uses mostly Toba terminology (Siahaan 1964: 69-71):

1. *umpama*  
Proverbs, maxims and similes consisting usually of four-line verses, similar to the Malay *pantun*. When used in speeches during traditional ceremonies (*upacara adat*) they may contain legal stipulations. The same form is also used for love poems exchanged between young men and women (*ende-ende* in South Tapanuli).
2. *andung-andung*  
Sung lamentations using special words and stylized expressions, performed primarily when mourning the death of a beloved person. Women are especially knowledgeable at performing these.
3. *tonggo-tonggo*  
Poetically arranged prayers uttered at festive occasions, full of alliterations, parallelisms etcetera that are considered as poetic or "beautiful" language. Spells (*tabas*) form a special sub-category; these are chanted and often contain borrowings from foreign languages.
4. *huling-hulingan*  
Short riddles. *Torhan-torhan* are narrative riddles with solutions in the form of a story.
5. *turi-turian*  
Stories including myths, legends and (fairy)tales.

In fact, there are many variations in the use of terminology between different Batak languages, so that the categories indicated by the terms do not always

exactly correspond. Some genres are even specific to one area, such as the *perjangka-jangkaan*, sung or chanted introductory exercises for studying to read the indigenous script, mentioned by Coleman, that apparently only exist in Pakpak-Dairi (Coleman 1983: 103).

#### THE LITERARY GENRES IN PAKPAK-DAIRI AND KARO

The literary genres developed special characteristics in Pakpak-Dairi and Karo that are connected with the language, culture, and natural environment. Some different forms and meanings are discussed below:

##### 1. *Empama*

Proverbial expressions or admonitions named *empama* or *perumpamaan*, are, as the term indicates, based on a simile or parable. While these very popular expressions may occur in daily conversation they are used especially in formal contexts, in ritual speeches as well as in storytelling. The well-known four-line verse form is divided into a first and a second part with rhyming second and fourth lines. This, along with other poetic qualities such as assonance, alliteration and a particular "speech rhythm" are basically mnemonic devices.

Many *empama* in four-line verse form are used in Pakpak-Dairi storytelling, especially in the songs and chants that are part of the performance. Traditionally, *empama* are used in the chant that is sung to introduce the performance, addressing the ancestors (*mersintabin*). In the Pakpak-Dairi *sukut-sukuten Sibuah Mburle*, performed by the storyteller Sonang Sitakar,<sup>2</sup> the opening *mersintabin* contained the following four-line *empama* that was chanted with many repetitions and elaborate embellishments:

*\*Rabi-rabi i babo page,  
dukut-dukut i babo bungke,  
mersintabi mo, le nang, kita lebe  
sisukutken adat si perlebe.*

One cuts the shrubs [growing] above the riceplants,  
And the weeds above the turkeyberry (*solanum torvum*),  
First we ask to be forgiven,  
For telling about the customs of old.

Besides four-line verses, other forms are also frequently used for Pakpak-Dairi *empama*. Examples of these are given in Oloan Tumangger's publication on Pakpak-Dairi culture entitled "The Pakpak-Dairi people" (*Manusia Pakpak-Dairi*). Besides four-line *empama* the publication includes *empama* of three, five, or six lines. The following *empama* may be considered as a one- or two-line form, which is introduced by the word *bage*, as, like, indicating that this

<sup>2</sup> More information about this *sukut-sukuten* is given in the last part of this article.

expression is a simile (Tumangger 1999: 135):

*\*Bage genderang,  
Oda salah iajari anakna inangna.*

As for the drum,  
It is not wrong for the child to teach its mother.

Comment: the largest drum in a set of nine *genderang* drums is named *inang genderang* (Manik 1977: 130, 2002: 148).

A similar expression also exists in Karo, reflecting a shared attitude towards the relationship between parent and child. This is an important theme in the *sukut-sukuten Sibuah Mburle* discussed below.

Even shorter *empama* occur in a recently published collection of one hundred traditional *empama* by Lister Berutu, which have been arranged according to topic and are followed by an explanation about the context in which they are used. The example cited here also occurs in the *sukut-sukuten Sibuah Mburle* (Berutu 2006: 17):

*\*Mbelgah-mbelgah cemun.*

To grow [up] like a cucumber.

Comment: this *empama* expresses the wish that an infant or child may grow up fast and in good health, as the cucumber is a fast-growing plant. It may be used by the mother's relatives when they come to see the newborn baby, or at some special occasion in the life of a child.

## 2. *Ende*

According to Tindi Radja Manik's Pakpak-Dairi – Indonesian dictionary the meaning of the word *ende* is song or melody (*lagu, nyanyian, langgam*), emphasizing the sound and performance manner rather than the literary form (Manik 1977: 99, 2002: 108). The great importance of this genre in Pakpak-Dairi culture is pointed out by the ethnomusicologist Lynette Moore in her PhD thesis on the songs of the Pakpak of North Sumatra (Moore 1985). She lists six main categories of songs, all referred to by the general term *ende* (-*ende*): songs for children, work-songs, songs of courtship and marriage, songs sung in narrative, songs for blessing, greeting and longing, and recreational songs. These are divided into sub-classes according to context, such as lullabies, songs for work in the rice fields or in the forest, dance songs, bathing songs, etc. As is usual in an oral tradition, every performance of a song is likely to vary. Most singers believe that the songs they sing were composed by their ancestors and were handed down through the generations (Moore 1985: 43).

Some song types require a special singing style that is related to the context

in which they are performed. Foremost among these are *odong-odong*, sung by men working in the forest and *tangis(-tangis)*, “crying songs” sung by women during funerals and other sad occasions. Both styles were used by Sonang Sitakar in his performance of the *sukut-sukuten Sibuah Mburle*.

a) *Odong-odong*

The term *odong-odong* is simply translated as “song”, *nyanyian*, in Tindi Radja Manik’s Pakpak-Dairi – dictionary, without further specification. But according to Oloan Tumangger’s publication on Pakpak-Dairi culture *odong-odong* refers specifically to the songs sung by men working in the solitude of the jungle when they collect forest products. Tumangger finds *odong-odong* very attractive because of their poetic qualities, often expressing pent-up feelings of sadness and disappointment in love or life. They may be performed either by a solo singer or in a choir and are not accompanied by instrumental music (Tumangger 1999: 88).

In Moore’s thesis the term *odong-odong* is said to refer to one of the two main singing styles used in Pakpak culture. It is characteristic for loud singing and is performed exclusively by men working in the forest (Moore 1985: 6). The singing of these songs while collecting incense (*kemenjen*) or other forest products serves to stay in contact with other workers and helps to combat the singer’s fears and feelings of loneliness (Moore 1985: 36). Most songs in *odong-odong* style are in free metre and are sung with much ornamentation (Moore 1985: 104, 117). Singers of these songs use characteristic poetic and/or melodic formulae that distinguish them from other traditional songs. Poetic formulae telling of the despair and the sad fate of the singer may be accompanied by long, melodically structured “sighs” or “cries” (Moore 1985: 107), similar to those used in the laments that are mainly sung by women.

Poetic formulae used in songs that are sung during incense collecting (*ende-ende kemenjen*) often refer to work in the jungle and its natural phenomena. The following example quoted from Moore’s thesis refers to birds that live among the *kemenjen* trees (Moore 1985: 111-113):

*\*Ku dok ngen nai kalak dilo-dilo, kepeken kiung i babo ndahen, nina le.*

I thought it was a person who called, but it was the *kiung* bird<sup>3</sup> on the top branch.

Note: the expression *nina le* is an example of the more or less meaningless vocables that are frequently used in Pakpak-Dairi songs to fill the poetic and/or melodic line.

Understandably, poetic formulae may also express “the preoccupation of

<sup>3</sup> According to Moore the *kiung* is a small, gregarious bird of the starling family (Moore 1985: 111).



the singers with their economic wellbeing”:

*\*Mersodip mono tendimu  
Teka mbelgah harga kemenjen.*

Let your spirit pray  
That the price of *kemenjen* will rise high.

b) *Tangis(-tangis)*

Sung and cried lamentations are named *tangis(-tangis)* in Pakpak-Dairi and Karo. In an article on the music of the Pakpak-Dairi of North Sumatra the ethnomusicologist Lynette Moore writes that these may be performed in the context of funerary rituals by female mourners, who often go into a trance with the help of *genderang* music. Then they address the departed spirit “in a language unintelligible to the other mourners” (Moore 1981: 42). However, during our fieldwork in North Sumatra we found that the genre is not limited to the context of funerals, but it is also used in storytelling, in which case it may be the lament of a lonely or wronged person.

During his performance of the *sukut-sukuten Sibuah Mburle* the storyteller Sonang Sitakar sang several laments (*tangis*) expressing the grief of Nan Tampuk Emas, the mother of the main character. The following lament is sung when her twin-brother, Raja Kelendungen, has decided to go to his maternal uncle to marry one of his cousins. Nan Tampuk Emas, who does not want to be left alone, expresses her feelings of sadness in the following lament:

*\*Ong, ong puhun ni turang  
dua kin kita sibeltek, da puhun ni turang  
sai merdekon bage lubang ni jarum  
tapi roh nola kidah  
dua pe kita sibeltek bage sirang bungkulalam, turang Raja  
Kelendungen  
nang, ulang keah pemakinendene bage sirang bungkulalam  
sada kesunduten sada kepeltaken  
nai tabahan pinang ngo katendene,  
pepulung bana embulak mada mertunas  
turut Raja Kelendungen, ninang.*

*Ong, ong, puhun ni turang*  
We two are in fact children of the same mother, *da puhun ni turang*  
definitely, we are like the hole of the needle  
but then I saw [him] come  
as we are children of the same mother, like separating a straight fire  
brother Raja Kelendungen  
*nang*, do not separate us, like splitting up a straight fire

one in the west, and one in the east,  
 when areca nut trees are felled, you say,  
 a heap of tree-trunks does not sprout, brother Raja Kelendungen,  
*ninang*.

Comment: as the Pakpak-Dairi lament is considered to be difficult to understand even to native speakers, it cannot really be properly translated – one can merely give an approximation of its meaning. One of the reasons why the laments are difficult to understand is their special textual structure that is related to their musical form. The texts of these laments contain two characteristic components:

1. Poetic formulae or phrases using particular expressions that occur mainly, or only, in laments,
2. Vocables or special syllables, words, or short phrases which function as “fillers” and are used in alternation with meaningful phrases. They occur in almost every song and do not contribute much to its meaning.

All laments in Sonang Sitakar’s performance of the *sukut-sukuten Sibuah Mburle* were introduced by the sobbed vocable *ong*, expressing its sad character. The phrase *puhun ni turang* is the most frequently used “filler” in the laments of Nan Tampuk Emas. While all laments contain different poetic formulae, repetition of formulae frequently occurs, usually with some variation. The formula *dua kin kita sibeltek* which is repeated as *dua pe kita sibeltek* in the same lament is used again in another lament, in combination with a different second part.

c) *Bilang-bilang*

In Karo the term *bilang-bilang* refers mainly to a written lament that is often inscribed on a piece of bamboo, expressing the sad feelings of a lovesick young man, or woman. In this case the composer/performer is not in trance and the language is intelligible to others. The opening section of a Karo *bilang-bilang* published by the linguist Uli Kozok is quoted here with my English translation (Kozok 1990: 107, 110):

*\*Maka io hari kuté bilang-bilang  
 kin ndubé buluh minak  
 si mula jadi, si mula tubuh  
 lako ni teruh langit si la erbinangun  
 si la ertongkut, si man penusuk-nusuken  
 ni babo taneh mekapal  
 si man pengité-ngitén énda  
 lako nitabah mama anak Karo mergana  
 man ingan nuri-nuriken até mesui*



*nandé, nandéku беру Sembiring.*

This is, as said, a lament on “oil-bamboo”  
that once originated, that once grew up  
under the sky which is not resting on pillars  
which is not supported, for which we bow down  
on top of this thick earth  
on which we walk as on a small bamboo bridge  
it was cut down by a young man of the Karo-Karo tribe  
as a place where he can express his feelings of pain  
mother, oh my mother of the Sembiring-clan.

### 3. *Tonggo-tonggo, mangmang*

While prayers are generally known as *tonggo-tonggo* in Pakpak-Dairi, according to Tindi Radja Manik’s dictionary the term *mangmang* refers specifically to prayers in cock-rituals that are performed to predict future events (Manik 1977: 195, 2002: 229). Shorter spells are known as *tabas*. In Karo, the term *mangmang* refers to oaths, incantations and (lengthy) formulae expressed during rituals (Neumann 1951: 188). While these ritual incantations are primarily oral texts, a report from the Department of Literature of the University of North Sumatra states that some exist in written form (Rahman et al. 1977: 9). The anthropologist Beatriz van der Goes defined the ritual specialist who knows to sing *mangmang*, called in Karo a *guru permangmang*, as “a person, either male or female, who understands the messages of the spirits and represents their voices in the *mangmang*, a kind of dialogue expressed in the form of a ritual chant” (Van der Goes 1997: 381). This implies that these Karo *mangmang* are neither learned by heart nor recited from memory, but composed in performance. Some passages in *mangmang* texts consist of relatively fixed, standard formulae that may occur, with variations, in different ritual contexts.

A *mangmang persentabin* is a ritual chant in which spirits are addressed in a singsong manner to ask for protection and success in the ritual. Usually, the complete text consists of a number of different sections. Both *mangmang* and *tabas* are full of poetic expressions, alliterations and parallelisms considered as “beautiful language”. They also make use of words borrowed from other languages, such as Malay or Toba, that make them less accessible to the audience. When performed during a ritual the words are usually difficult to understand, as they are either muttered or chanted in a fast manner.

The following passage from a Karo *mangmang persentabin* was sung during the inauguration-ritual of a house. This fragment addresses the fire of the hearth (Van der Goes 1997: 384):

*\*I maka kam pe nini  
singian-ngian ibas pusung dapur ena arih  
kam pe kugelari ka nge gelarndu nini  
gelarndu kepe беру dayang simanjilam dangdang so bias*

aku ngelaga aku nina buluh laga  
 silamndu labo erbias-bias nini  
 enda pe bage me nini  
 adi lit kin gia nipi jahat nipi gulut  
 entem-entemen nu begu  
 adi lit kin gia ulah-ulah kalak si la mehuli rukur  
 adi lit kin gia singabat ngali aku nina  
 silamndu nini  
 maka sikap kari runggunta enda nini.

Also you, grandparent  
 who lives at the navel of this hearth  
 I shall also address your name, grandparent  
 your name is lady whose flames lick everything  
 I wish to excel myself, said the bamboo  
 your fire tongues are sufficient, grandparent  
 to threaten, grandparent  
 whether someone has a bad dream (or) a nightmare  
 is menaced by a ghost  
 or whether there is sorcery from persons with bad thoughts  
 whether something is obstructed or thwarted, I said  
 let your fire lick it, grandparent  
 so that this meeting can be arranged, grandparent.

#### 4. *Kuning-kuningen, torka-torkan*

Short one-line riddles, *kuning-kuningen*, and short-story riddles, *torka-torkan* exist both in Karo and in Pakpak-Dairi. The shorter riddles are especially popular with children and urge them to reflect, as in the following Pakpak-Dairi *kuning-kuningen* found in Oloan Tumangger's publication on Pakpak-Dairi culture (Tumangger 1999: 75):

*\*Kade mi sikali gerari panganen, dua kali gerari oda panganen?*

What is it that can be eaten when named once, and cannot be eaten when named twice?

Solution: *sawi* is a type of vegetable. The duplicated form *sawi-sawi* is the name of a small knife used for cutting rice.

Tindi Radja Manik's Pakpak-Dairi – Indonesian dictionary gives an example of an introductory question for a narrative riddle: "How can one take away the fruit of a tree that is firmly guarded?" (Manik 1977: 318, 2002: 385).

#### 5. *Sukut-sukuten, turi-turin*

The art of storytelling has always been popular in Batak areas, either as a pass-time or in ritual contexts. Traditionally, ritual specialists must have knowledge of the myths and legends that explain the origin of the rituals

they perform. Since scholars of Batak culture observed that the shamans played an important role as literary experts and also knew to preserve this knowledge in writing, they asked them to produce written versions of orally transmitted literature including poetry, riddles, legends, and stories, enabling them to study these outside their performance context. Until the present time, shamans have preserved their knowledge of prayers, incantations and storytelling, as Ginting reports in an article on the traditional Karo *guru Pa Surdam* (Ginting 1990: 87).

However, the knowledge of storytelling is not the exclusive possession of ritual specialists, and is not limited to those who can read and write Batak script. Storytelling and other genres of oral literature are known to and performed by many members of a Batak community. It is an intimate experience that takes place in a relaxed atmosphere, between people who know each other well and live together in the same household or village. The members of the audience, many of whom can sing poetry and tell stories themselves, are not merely passive listeners, but stimulate the storyteller by reacting, asking questions etc. In his thesis on Batak folk-stories, Voorhoeve writes that traditional storytelling takes place at night, for example when people stay in a hut in the rice fields, or in the jungle (Voorhoeve 1927: 15).

According to Voorhoeve, the most common word for all sorts of tales in Toba is *suhutan*, yet the word *turi-turian* may be used in the same sense. In Dairi the most common word for story is *sukut-sukuten*, the speakers of Karo use the term *turi-turin* in the same general sense (Voorhoeve 1927: 15-17). In Neumann's Karo-Dutch dictionary, the word *turi-turin* signifies, besides "story", also "report", or, "how it really happened" (Neumann 1951: 339). The expression *erturi-turin* means "orderly, clear", while *la erturi-turin* means "chaotic, confusing", or "without reason". According to Juara Ginting the term *turi-turin* in Karo also means the relationship between things or people (personal communication). In Pakpak-Dairi the term *sukut-sukuten* refers to tales and stories in general, *turi-turiin* to (clan) histories (Coleman 1983: 103).

Traditional storytelling goes far beyond the accurate exposition of a chain of events: it is a complex communicative act that includes, besides the speech patterns of informal communication, all genres of the oral tradition as discussed above. Thus, a good storyteller is a verbal artist with a thorough command of all speech types and levels. He or she must be able to chant invocations and spells, sing poetic verses, imitate natural sounds, insert riddles, proverbs and idiomatic expressions, crack jokes and sing tragic laments. Moreover, besides being able to entertain, he/she should also educate the listeners by transmitting knowledge of the past, and of moral, behavioral and legal codes.

#### THE PAKPAK-DAIRI SUKUT-SUKUTEN SIBUAH MBURLE

All the qualities of good storytelling were present in the Pakpak-Dairi *sukut-sukuten Sibuah Mburle*, performed in a wonderful manner by the aged storyteller Sonang Sitakar in the village of Sukarame, Kabupaten Dairi, in

1979 (see the Photograph). The story was recorded during one of the research trips I made with my late husband Professor Lode F. Brakel when he was director of the Seminar of Indonesian and Pacific Languages at the University of Hamburg.<sup>4</sup> One of the reasons why we decided to document traditional storytelling in Dairi was that both the language and its storytelling tradition were endangered. As this was a cause for great concern to the speakers of the language whom we met, our research was enthusiastically supported by officials from the Department of Education and Culture of the Kabupaten Dairi in Sidikalang. Bapak M.R. Solin (BA), one of the cultural officers, arranged interviews as well as the performance by Sonang Sitakar, whom he regarded as the most knowledgeable Dairi storyteller. He accompanied us to the village of Sukaramai, where the village leader, Bapak Kabeaken, warmly received us in his home and entertained us with a cultural evening (*malam kesenian*).



Sonang Sitakar and Lode F. Brakel; Photograph by the author, in North Sumatra, 1979.

The following English version of the story is based on a summary in Indonesian by M.R. Solin, the official of the Department of Education and Culture of the Kabupaten Dairi who acted as a helper of the storyteller.

#### SIBUAH MBURLE

The main theme of the story of "The wild mango boy" is an inauspicious

<sup>4</sup> The recorded text will be discussed and analysed in my forthcoming book on Dairi stories and storytelling.



event: the birth of twins, a boy and a girl, which could result in an illegitimate marriage between the two. The father, Si Haji, organizes a large feast and sacrifices fifteen buffalo in order to prevent this, requesting from the gods and goddesses that the children will be happy, handsome, and intelligent and not violate the law. His wife's brother who is the children's uncle (*puhun*) is invited to perform the ritual cutting of the children's hair and give them names.

A problem arises when Si Haji does not pay the customary reward of gold and cloth for performing this task. Angered, the uncle asks the gods to curse his brother and sister and returns home full of resentment. In due time, Si Haji's country is struck by a contagious disease, and all the inhabitants die, including Si Haji and his wife. Only the two children named Nan Tampuk Emas and Si Raja Kelendungan survive.

When the children grow into adolescents, the brother decides to go to the house of his maternal uncle in order to be married to one of his daughters. His sister protests because she does not want to be left all alone, lamenting day and night until she faints. In her state of unconsciousness the God Debata Guru drops a fruit that has the form of a chicken's egg into her wide-open mouth. It enters her throat and, as this is painful, she squeezes it down until it drops into her stomach. Then the thing inside her starts to speak and sing, telling her that she need not be afraid as he is a present of Batara Guru, and is named Sibuah Mburle (the wild mango boy). He is an intelligent and charming young man of high standing, powerful and beautiful.

When the unfortunate Nan Tampuk Emas has been pregnant for seven years and seven months, she is so desperate that she tries to commit suicide, but in vain. In the meantime Sibuah Mburle gives his mother consolation, humming from inside her womb that she must patiently endure her fate. He advises her to go to find her brother who is living in the west, where he has married a daughter of his uncle and has many children. He named his youngest daughter Nan Tampuk Emas after the sister whom he left behind.

Following the advice of her unborn child the mother of Sibuah Mburle goes to her brother in the west. But when she arrives at his house, she is mistreated, because her relatives believe her to be Raja Kelendungan's first wife. Moreover, the singing child inside her womb is considered a bad omen. Sibuah Mburle tells his mother to pray to Debata Guru and ask for a magic ring. With its help they build a large, beautiful house. Then Sibuah Mburle is finally born in the form of a chicken's egg which is kept in a bag in one of the rooms. After that Raja Kelendungan becomes ill and is paralyzed for a long time. He is finally cured when he asks his sister to forgive him.

Now Sibuah Mburle wishes to marry one of the daughters of his uncle Raja Kelendungan, but they refuse. Only the youngest one, who is also called Nan Tampuk Emas, agrees. After having been married for several months, she becomes desperate as he still has the shape of a chicken's egg and they only know each other's voice.

One day, when everybody has gone to the fields to plant rice, they are amazed to hear someone playing drums in the village: Sibuah Mburle has

emerged from his eggshell as a strong and handsome young man. When he hits an ugly piece of cloth, it turns into a nice jacket, and when he hits a stone this becomes a horse. Then he goes to the field to visit the people planting rice. Everyone is surprised about the young man's strength and beauty. All the daughters of Raja Kelendungen smile at him, trying to conquer his heart. In order to test his wife's faithfulness he asks her to marry him. But Nan Tampuk Emas, who does not know his true identity, refuses because she is already married (to Sibuah Mburle).

Back in the village, an old woman informs Nan Tampuk Emas about Sibuah Mburle's secret. One day, when everybody has gone to the fields again, Nan Tampuk Emas stays behind, hiding herself. When Sibuah Mburle emerges from his cover and rides on horseback to the field, Nan Tampuk Emas finds the cover. She burns one half to ashes, keeping the other half between her breasts. And when Sibuah Mburle returns, he cannot find his cover back, so he asks his wife for it. Nan Tampuk Emas tells him what she has done. Now he asks forgiveness for having played around with her, and they fondly embrace.

Since then they are husband and wife living happily together like normal human beings. Unfortunately, his mother now wishes Sibuah Mburle, her child, to become her husband. Sibuah Mburle suggests her to wash the magic ring, and to put it in a room for seven days and seven nights. She may open it on the eighth day. "If there will be a man, he will be your husband." The mother Nan Tampuk Emas does as told, and indeed on the eighth day she finds a man. Then there are two newlywed couples, Sibuah Mburle with his wife and his mother Nan Tampuk Emas with her husband. Thus ends the Pakpak Dairi story of Sibuah Mburle told by the storyteller Sonang Sitakar.

## CONCLUSION

In North Sumatra, as well as in other islands of the Indonesian Archipelago, oral and written literary traditions have existed side by side for many centuries. Therefore the Pakpak-Dairi or Karo oral traditions are not necessarily threatened by the existence of written literature, as I have pointed out in previous articles (Brakel-Papenhuyzen 2004, 2007). In Indonesian and other cultures with living oral traditions, form and content of oral literary genres are closely connected with their performance context. The telling of stories in Pakpak-Dairi was more than mere entertainment, it also served to remind the inhabitants of small and relatively isolated villages of their customs, rules and regulations that were not fixed in writing. Telling about these was a way to make them accessible to and accepted by the listening communities, as was emphasized by Sonang Sitakar in the story he told us and his Pakpak-Dairi audience. Thus, by formulating cultural ideas and practices, oral traditions maintain a specific cultural identity for their participants, and by recalling past events they also represent in a sense the people's collective memory.

The rich literary heritage of the Karo and Pakpak-Dairi peoples of North Sumatra is of great importance for maintaining their culture, and for enhancing social cohesion. Moreover, these unique oral traditions of North Sumatra are



a rich source of information on local customs and religious concepts. They are of interest to scholars of oral literary traditions, linguists, ethno-musicologists and anthropologists. Therefore this cultural heritage deserves to be preserved and cherished for the benefit of future generations in North Sumatra, in Indonesia and in the world at large.

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